

# Report to the Sixty-Fifth Legislature

## Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program



Upland game bird hunting in Central Montana. Photo credit: Michael Kowalski

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Montana is fortunate to have a program dedicated to upland game bird habitats and hunting access. The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP) advances game bird conservation, providing the means for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) and its partners to work directly with interested landowners to achieve abundant game bird populations. As changes in land uses intensify and hunting access becomes more difficult to attain, the value of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP) appreciates (Figure 1).



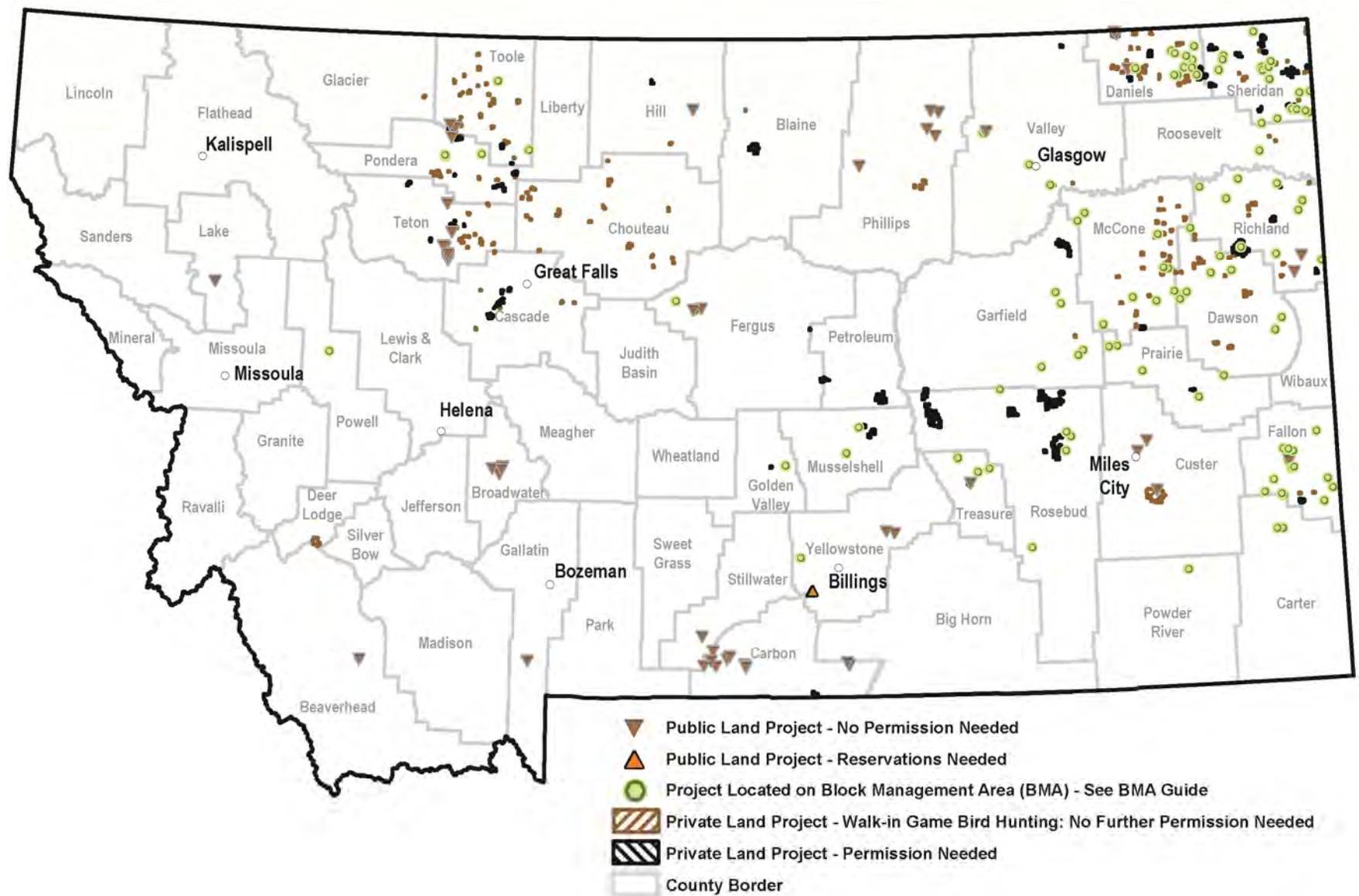


Figure 1. Overview of active UGBEP projects (August 2016).



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## Program Goal

*To efficiently and responsibly conserve and enhance upland game bird habitats and populations—providing quality public hunting opportunities for upland game birds for present and future generations.*

## INTRODUCTION

A portion of the funds received from the sale of each upland game bird hunting license must be used by the department for the exclusive purpose to preserve and enhance upland game bird populations in Montana (87-1-246 through 87-1-249, MCA).

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) administers the statewide Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP), which is organized into two parts:

1. Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Program (Montana ARM 12.9.7)
2. Upland Game Bird Release Program (Montana ARM 12.9.6)

The principle outcomes of the UGBEP are:

- establishment or enhancement of upland game bird habitats;
- conservation of valuable game bird habitats;
- enhanced public upland game bird hunting opportunities
- release of pen-reared pheasants into suitable habitats to establish new populations; and
- wild turkey (and other upland game bird) transplants.

Figure 1 (page 2) provides an overview of active UGBEP projects, which include habitat enhancement projects and pheasant release sites enrolled on private and public lands. As of November 30, 2016, the UGBEP had 457 active contracts that enhanced and conserved over 486,000 acres of upland game bird habitat and offered over 800,000 acres of public and private lands for game bird hunting.

Since FY 2010, the program continues to receive additional oversight from an Upland Game Bird Citizens' Advisory Council (Council) consisting of 12 members appointed by the director (87-1-251, MCA). Membership includes two legislators, one from each party and in each house, a local chamber of commerce representative, upland game bird hunters, conservationists, an upland game bird biologist, and landowners. The council and department meet twice each year, once in the spring to make recommendations on proposed work plans for the upcoming field season and later in the fall to review program accomplishments. All council meetings are open to the public, who are invited to provide feedback to the department and the council.

This biennial report chronicles program achievements, summarizes revenue and expenditures, and tabulates habitat enhancement projects and upland game bird releases conducted in FY 2015 and FY 2016. This report is intended for Montana legislators, the Council, FWP staff, and interested organizations and citizens.

## BIENNIAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Several unique program milestones were accomplished during FY 2015 and FY 2016 and are highlighted in the section below. A more comprehensive review of habitat accomplishments initiated during the biennium is summarized on page 26 of this report.

### UGBEP HABITAT SPECIALISTS

Since 2009, the UGBEP has had 3 field positions specifically dedicated to program implementation in focus areas defined by the program's long-term strategic plan. During the first half of FY 2015, the program's positions remained vacant to fulfill of FTE vacancy savings requirements. In late 2014/early 2015, these positions were reclassified from upland game bird biologists to habitat specialists and were filled by 3 new regional staff:

- Jake Doggett, Region 4 – Conrad
- Ken Plourde, Region 6 – Flaxville
- Jackie Tooke, Region 7 – Miles City

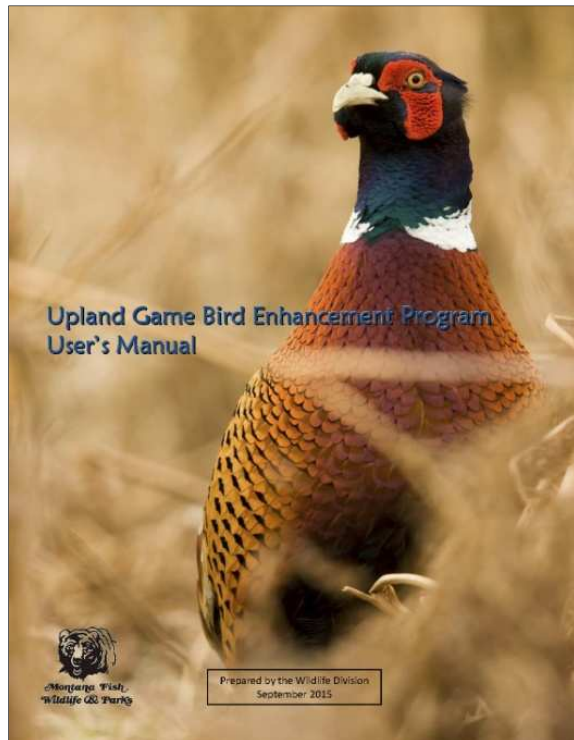
The three habitat specialists have been actively seeking and developing quality habitat projects within their respective regions. They have also interacted with the UGBEP Council, including reporting on their annual work plans and related accomplishments. Further, the habitat specialists provide relevant input to the program staff and the Council, influencing program implementation.

In FY 2015, the department held a comprehensive orientation with the habitat specialists, regional managers, and program staff to go over the program's strategic plan, goals, statutes and rules, and habitat needs and management for upland game birds. A year later, the same group met in the field to review and discuss habitat projects and related strategies.

### UGBEP USER'S MANUAL

In recent years, the UGBEP has undergone changes that included adoption of a long-term Strategic Plan and updated administrative rules. One of the necessities of this program is keeping in step with landowner interests and Farm Bill opportunities, providing products that effectively advance the program's dual habitat and hunting mission. The updated program user's manual was developed through input from regional and program staff and the Council (Figure 2). Effective September 30, 2015, this newest version provides a framework that guides program implementation in a consistent, efficient, and successful manner, in compliance with state statutes, rules, and department guidelines. The UGBEP User's Manual can be found online at: [fwp.mt.gov/ugbep](http://fwp.mt.gov/ugbep)





**Figure 2. UGBEP User's Manual—2015 edition.**

## HABITAT MANAGEMENT LEASES

In addition to cost-sharing habitat projects, the program may also enter into agreements to lease high value upland game bird habitats (87-1-248(2), MCA). In the program's history, the only leases available to landowners were 30-year sagebrush leases (enrollment is currently inactive) that targeted expansive sagebrush-grasslands habitat. At the time, UGBEP sagebrush lease payments were leveraged with federal dollars.

The department recognized that leasing smaller ( $\leq 160$  acres) yet highly productive upland game bird habitats may be an effective tool for enhancing habitat and providing substantial upland game bird hunting opportunities. An enrollment process was developed that included a lease payment based on quality of hiding cover. These were coined "Habitat Management Leases."

Habitat management leases are intended for high quality upland game bird habitats that are not actively enrolled in CRP and that also provide enhanced hunting opportunities. These management leases are not intended to be expansive projects, but instead focus on smaller, high value sites. Habitats eligible for a habitat management lease might include riparian areas, old farmsteads with idle cover, established shelterbelts, a mix of idle cover, cattail sloughs, or other productive habitat features. Expired UGBEP projects may also be eligible for enrollment.

Private lands or, in some cases, DNRC State Trust lands may be enrolled. Where eligible, leases may occur on lands enrolled in the Block Management Program. Habitat management leases require that the habitat is managed for wildlife, primarily upland game birds, and any

agricultural use is deferred while actively leased. The maximum enrollment is 160 acres in terms of the lease payment; however a landowner may volunteer to enroll additional acres for access. Payment is based on the type of cover and completed weed maintenance and is paid annually for up to 10 years:

- Winter cover = \$25 per acre
- Security cover = \$20 per acre
- Light cover = \$10 per acre
- Weed maintenance = \$2.10 per acre

During this biennium, the program enrolled its first habitat management lease in Pondera County on lands administered by DNRC. The management lease is on 72 acres in association with over 2,200 acres of accessible public land. Four more management leases have been enrolled in FY 2017 with more habitat management leases in the planning stages. The photo below (Figure 3) shows the interspersed light, nesting, and winter covers found on the DNRC lease.

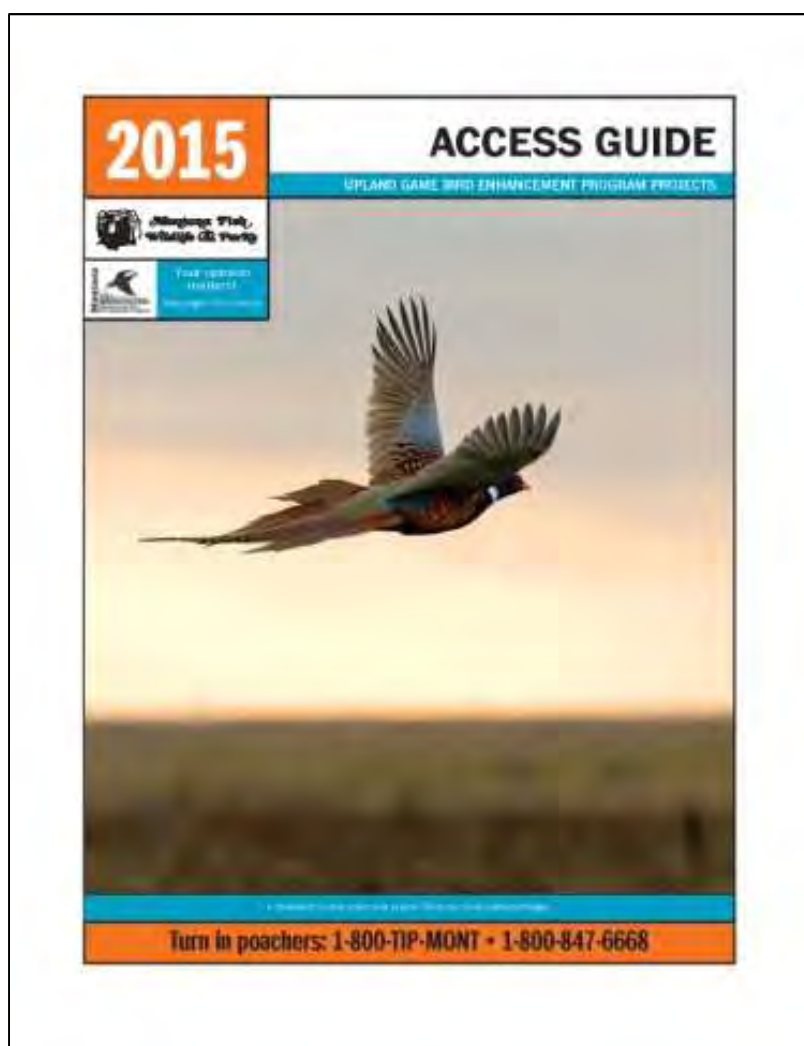


Photo credit: Jake Doggett

**Figure 3: DNRC Bullhead Habitat Management Lease.**

## UGBEP PROJECTS ACCESS GUIDE

The Access Guide, published annually, provides hunters with project information such as general location, project type, and method used to obtain landowner's permission to hunt (Figure 4). In FY 2016, FWP redesigned the access guide with over 60 pages of project maps that showed the locations of UGBEP projects at a 1:30,000-scale. Previously, the guide showed the projects' general locations on 8 large insert maps. This new format depicts private lands projects with access boundaries represented geospatially and color coded to indicate the access area is open to: (1) walk-in game bird hunting with no further permission needed from the landowner (brown polygons), (2) landowner permission needed prior to hunting game birds (black polygons), (3) private land projects enrolled in the Block Management Program (green circles) or (4) projects are on public land (brown triangles). See Figure 5 of the map example.



**Figure 4. The UGBEP Projects Access Guide for FY 2016.**





**Figure 5. Active projects on private and public lands as depicted in the 2016 Hunting Access Guide.**

The program strives to keep pace with the technology available to hunters. New this biennium, all program guide maps are now available online as geospatial PDF maps. When downloaded on devices such as "smart" phones or tablets, these PDF maps allow visitors to dynamically visualize their position in the field relative to important features on the map, such as roads, towns, and project access area boundaries. Once downloaded to the device, no Internet or cellular connection is required.

Each year the Access Guide is distributed to all FWP regions by late August. Hunters may also request a guide be mailed to them. The program printed 4,850 guides in FY 2015 and 5,150 guides in FY 2016. The demand for printed guides has progressively increased, and the program ordered additional guides mid-season because hunter demand exceeded the number of guides available. FWP keeps track of all guides requested through the program web page. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of guides requested and distributed to hunters. Beginning in 2012, web-based requests for the guide increased dramatically.

**Table 1. Total number of guides requested by year through the program’s web page (HQ).**

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Total Guide Requests</b>
2016	1,905
2015	1,856
2014	631
2013	464
2012	459
2011	249
2010	212

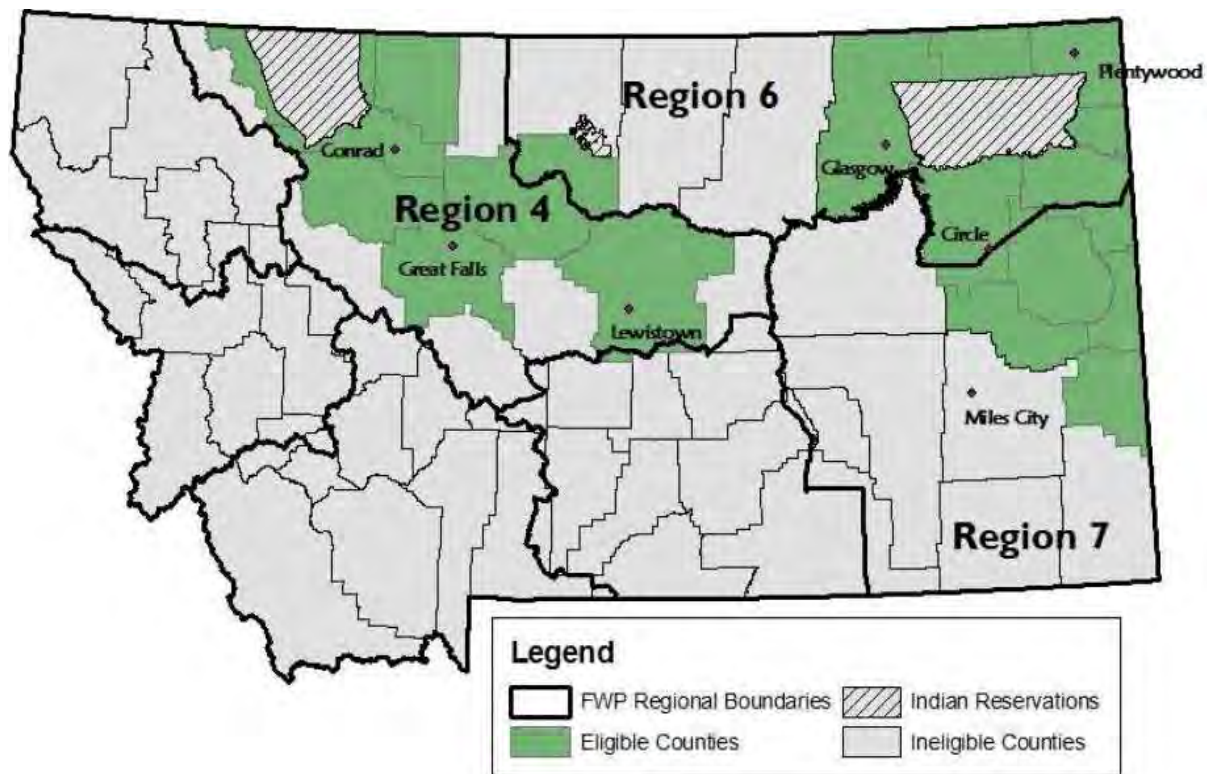
## OPEN FIELDS FOR GAME BIRD HUNTERS

In August 2014, FWP was successfully awarded a second USDA Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA HIP) grant of \$491,260 to expand hunting access opportunities through enrollment in Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters. The UGBEP allocated \$450,000 as match for the grant.

“Open Fields” pays an add-on lease payment to landowners enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) who allow free walk-in public hunting for game birds. No further permission is required from the landowner. Leases do not allow for emergency haying or grazing that is in addition to scheduled maintenance.

Open Fields enrollment is voluntary and open to private lands enrolled in CRP within focus areas in Regions 4, 6, and 7. Focus areas were delineated in counties that had the potential to enhance bird populations and maximize hunter recreation (Figure 6). FWP sent nearly 2,000 letters to landowners within the focus areas inviting them to apply to Open Fields. Eligible lands were limited to properties that could be accessed by public routes and were not actively enrolled in Upland Game Bird Enhancement or Block Management programs in an effort to emphasize work with landowners new to FWP programs and to expand access.





**Figure 6. Map showing priority counties (focus areas) for Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters.**

Landowners enrolled in Open Fields received a onetime payment of \$5 per CRP acre (maximum 160 CRP acres) for each year remaining in their CRP contract. Enrollment was voluntary but competitive, based on staff evaluations and scoring criteria. Prospective enrollees could offer additional acres for walk-in access, which enhanced their application scores. Once enrolled, landowners were required to follow the USDA Farm Service Agency standard maintenance plans, but forego any additional emergency haying or grazing opportunities during the duration of their CRP contract.

During FY 2016, 38 landowners enrolled a total of 11,971 acres into Open Fields. Of that sum, 5,497 acres were lands enrolled in CRP (e.g., the basis of the Open Fields payment) and 6,474 acres were offered by landowners to provide additional access for game bird hunters (Table 2). Open Fields enrollment terms varied from 2 to 15 years in length, based on the landowner's CRP contract term. There was no Open Fields enrollment in FY 2015 because the program's dedicated positions remained vacant to fulfill of FTE vacancy savings.

Enrolled lands were clearly posted with program signs to identify the area open to walk-in game bird hunting (Figure 7). The annual UGBEP Projects Access Guide depicts access boundaries of lands enrolled in Open Fields.





Figure 7. Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters program sign.

Since September 2012 (FY 2013), the UGBEP and landowners have enrolled 165 active Open Fields projects, including FY 2017 enrollments, opening up a total 58,305 acres of access and maintaining 23,809 acres of CRP. Open Fields has proven to be an effective conservation tool and has become increasingly popular with game bird hunters (Figure 8). Perpetuation of CRP and other quality game bird habitats while providing free public walk in access remains a high priority for UGBEP.

Table 2. Open Fields summary table – accomplishments.

Enrollment Year <sup>1</sup>	# Contracts	CRP Acres (Project Acres)	Total Acres <sup>2</sup>
FY 2013	56	8,298	18,109
FY 2014	42	5,862	17,337
FY 2016	38	5,497	11,971
FY 2017	29	4,152	10,888
<b>Totals</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>23,809</b>	<b>58,305</b>

<sup>1</sup> No Open Fields enrollment in FY 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Sum of CRP acres and additional acres offered for access.



**Figure 8. Pheasant Forever members enjoy a great hunt on an Open Fields project site.**

The VPA HIP grant initially ended on September 30, 2017. The department recently requested a no-cost extension that was successfully awarded. The new termination date is now September 30, 2018, which will allow the program to pursue enrollment for an additional year. The program's next Open Fields enrollment period will be in early 2017.

#### WESTERN FORESTS COOPERATIVE BIOLOGIST

In western Montana, forest resource managers are faced with reduced budgets and limited staff capacity, which often limit the timely implementation of beneficial forest management practices. A National Wild Turkey Federation Cooperative Wildlife Biologist position, funded by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and FWP, was filled November 2015 (FY 2016) by Dave Nikonow. His primary focus is to deliver sound beneficial forest management practices that improve wildlife habitat, primarily for forest grouse and wild turkey, and access on public and private lands.

In his first year, Dave worked on nine USFS projects on five separate Ranger Districts. These projects are in various stages of completion ranging from pre-planning and writing of National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents to implementation. Below are his accomplishments since starting in this biennium:

- Murphy Creek – contributed on NEPA documents and technical design of this 120-acre timber sale.
- Swamp Eddy – attended inter-disciplinary team meetings, assisted with technical design, and contributed to NEPA documents for this 9,200-acre timber sale.
- Sweeney Creek – promoted and procured funding for this 120-acre land acquisition.
- Redd Bull – attended inter-disciplinary team meetings and have had conversations with the resource specialist to promote grouse habitat on this 12,500-acre timber sale.
- Frenchtown Face – contributed to the technical design and will implement monitoring on this 235-acre prescribed fire treatment.
- South Fork Ecosystem Maintenance Burn – contributed to the technical design and will implement monitoring on this 200-acre prescribed fire treatment.
- Sawmill/Strawberry – implemented monitoring on this 500-acre noxious weed treatment.
- French/Madison – implemented monitoring and contributed to project design on this 500-acre noxious weed treatment.
- Johnson/Slowery – contributed to the project design; currently seeking funding for this 4-acre aspen enhancement.

Dave also collaborated with FWP, USFS, and the Blackfoot Challenge on the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area's 270-acre noxious weed and aspen enhancement project. This property is collaboratively managed by FWP, USFS, and the Blackfoot Challenge.

For FY 2016, the program expended \$24,731 towards the cooperative biologist position. This work is funded through December 2017. FWP will seek another contract to continue expanded capacity for completing habitat management work.

#### COOPERATIVE FARMING POSITIONS

Between 2008 and 2012, FWP partnered with Habitat Forever (HF), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and local Pheasant Forever (PF) chapters through Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) to support farming activities in Billings (FWP/HF/BLM/PF) and Denton (PF/FWP/HF) that resulted in enhanced upland game bird habitats on lands open to the public. On December 31, 2012, the two MOUs expired. In order to ensure existing habitat projects were maintained, the department solicited requests for proposals from prospective contractors to continue work in the Billings and Denton vicinities. In April 2013, the department awarded Habitat Forever with 2 personal services contracts to continue these habitat enhancement activities. Both contracts are scheduled to expire on December 31, 2017. FWP will seek to renew both contracts annually through December 31, 2019, if unspent funding remains in the contract.

During FY 2015, a third position was created specifically for the Lake County area to enhance upland habitat on Ninepipe WMA; renovate native grasslands on USFWS Wetland Protection Areas, and when time allows, enhance habitat on portions of the Flathead Indian Reservation.



Charlie Holtz was hired as the Habitat Specialist, and his position is supported through funds contributed by the UGBEP and the USFWS. The contract for this position terminates on August 31, 2019, but may be renewed annually until funding in the contract is expended.

The primary purpose of these three partnership positions is to conduct intensive habitat enhancements and maintenance activities to improve habitat for game birds and other wildlife on lands that are accessible to public hunting. The outcome of these activities not only provides productive habitat for upland game birds but also provides quality opportunities for upland game bird hunters in areas where public hunting access can be limited.

Habitat enhancement and maintenance accomplishments during the past biennium are described below for each of these 3 contracts.

#### REGION 1 LAKE COUNTY-BASED FARMING (FWP/USFWS/HF/PF PARTNERSHIP)

The Habitat Forever Habitat Specialist focuses primarily on renovating upland habitats on USFWS Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) and on FWP Ninepipe WMA. These areas are popular hunting destinations, known for their beauty and highly productive waterfowl and pheasant habitats (Figure 9). The WMA offers approximately 4,000 acres of hunting access and WPAs span nearly 4,000 acres. During FY 2015, approximately 300 acres of winter food, nesting cover, and winter cover were established and maintained. The program expended \$8,117 in FY 2015. During FY 2016, over 500 acres of upland and waterfowl habitats were established or maintained and total program expenditures were \$24,276. Table 3 provides an overview of accomplishments that occurred during the biennium.



**Figure 9. A hunter reported difficulty keeping track of his dogs in this Triticale food plot but bagged a rooster nonetheless. (Sandmark WPA, Lake County)**

**Table 3. Summary of habitat enhancement and maintenance activities: Lake County.**

<b>Project Site</b>	<b>FY 2015</b>	<b>FY 2016</b>
USFWS Sandmark WPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 40 acres of spring wheat and barley food plots</li> <li>• 4 acres of forb / grass strips</li> <li>• Prepped 1 acre for forb establishment</li> <li>• Weed management: 10 acres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20 acres food plots: winter wheat / spring oats</li> <li>• 20 acres food plots: spring wheat</li> <li>• 5 acres of forb / grass strips</li> <li>• Wetland management: 5 wetlands</li> <li>• Herbicide treatment: 50 acres</li> </ul>
USFWS Crow WPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 48 acres winter cover: basin wild rye and tall wheat grass</li> <li>• 56 acres smooth brome eradication</li> <li>• Weed management: nest cover site near ponds (3 acres), whitetop and Canada thistle (10 acres), whitetop (53 acres)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established winter wheat (53 acres)</li> <li>• 48 acres of basin wild rye and tall wheatgrass maintenance</li> <li>• Established 20 acres winter wheat</li> <li>• Established 40 acres spring wheat and oats</li> <li>• Established 3 acres nesting cover around ponds</li> <li>• Upland shrub planting (2,000 plants).</li> </ul>
<b>Project Site</b>	<b>FY 2015</b>	<b>FY 2016</b>
USFWS Duck Haven WPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weed management: 6 acres</li> <li>• Began mapping for Russian olive and Yellow willow tree removal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established winter wheat: 10 acres</li> <li>• Grass, grain and forb treatment on 3 acres</li> <li>• Invasive tree removal and cut stump treatment</li> <li>• Herbicide treatment: 100 acres</li> <li>• Upland shrub (400 plants)</li> </ul>
USFWS Herak WPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interseed forbs into tall wheatgrass field (7 acres)</li> <li>• Smooth brome eradication (1 acre)</li> </ul>	Herbicide treatment: 12 acres
FWP Ninepipe WMA Post Creek Unit	Herbicide treatment targeting quackgrass, whitetop, and teasel (12 acres)	Herbicide treatment on 15 acres: food plots, project site that will be seeded next year
FWP Ninepipe WMA Cochran Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site prep for food plot (9 acres)</li> <li>• Site prep unproductive field to be planted to grass (2 acres)</li> <li>• Herbicide treatments (4 acres)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planted grass in 2 acres</li> <li>• Mowed weeds in planted grass area, 2 acres</li> <li>• Herbicide treatment 5 acres</li> </ul>
FWP Ninepipe WMA Grizzly Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultivated Field to Grass Treatments (2 acres)</li> </ul>	Monitored cultivated field to grass treatment

Project Site	FY 2015	FY 2016
FWP Ninepipe WMA 212 / 93 Junction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultivated Field to Grass Treatments (2 acres)</li> <li>• Smooth Brome Conversion between food plots (2 acres)</li> </ul>	Monitored field to grass conversions
FWP Ninepipe WMA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shelterbelt maintenance – cultivated 20 acres</li> <li>• Herbicide application 5 acres</li> <li>• Food plots maintenance (14 acres)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established two 2-acre food plots</li> <li>• 5-acre disk and seeding to nesting cover</li> <li>• Isolated invasive trees stump cut treated</li> </ul>
FWP Ninepipe WMA: Short Eared Unit	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reed canary pond herbicide treatment, prescribed burn, herbicide treatment, seeded nesting cover, planted 1,000 wetland plants (5 acres)</li> <li>• Reed canary pond herbicide treatment, prescribed burn, herbicide treatment, seeded nesting cover (3 acres).</li> <li>• Herbicide treatment (2x) invasive species in tall wheatgrass (8 acres)</li> <li>• Food plot herbicide treatment (8 acres)</li> </ul>
Project Site	FY 2015	FY 2016
FWP Ninepipe WMA: Headquarters Unit	NA	Herbicide treatment 19 acres
FWP Ninepipes WMA: Griffiths Unit	NA	4-acre food plot: herbicide treatment
FWP Ninepipes WMA: Native Prairie Unit	NA	Invasive tree removal: cut stumps, applied herbicide treatment
FWP Ninepipes WMA: Ringneck Ranch Unit	NA	Maintained 8-acres food plot: herbicide treatment
FWP Ninepipes WMA: Allen Unit	NA	Maintained 8-acres food plot: herbicide treatment
FWP Ninepipes Herak - Myhre Unit	NA	Fence removal of west and north border of property boundary of state and federal land
FWP Ninepipes Palmer Unit	NA	Maintained irrigation canal
USFWS Kicking Horse WPA	NA	Boundary fence removal: Tribal/Federal lands
USFWS Johnson 80 WPA	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 12-acre Interseeding conversion project</li> <li>• 3-acre winter wheat establishment</li> <li>• 6-acre interseeding conversion project</li> </ul>

#### REGION 4 DENTON-BASED FARMING (FWP/HF/PF PARTNERSHIP)

The following projects have been developed and subsequently maintained by the Central Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever (CMCPF) and the Habitat Forever Habitat Specialist. This partnership primarily focuses on five properties: PF Coffee Creek (800 acres deeded); PF Wolf Creek (1,000 acres deeded); DNRC Wolf Creek (2,500 acres); DNRC Coffee Creek (640 acres) and the Beckman WMA (6,568 acres), totaling over 11,500 acres of habitat and hunting opportunity.

Throughout the biennium, habitat work comprised mostly maintenance of existing enhancement projects (Table 4). Ongoing maintenance efforts include mechanical tillage, in-row hand weeding, control of currant worms in the golden currant and tent caterpillars in the chokecherries, spraying and cultivating field bindweed infestations, and food plots (Figure 10).

In FY 2015 and 2016, the UGBEP contributed \$53,281 and \$53,160, respectively, towards the projects established and maintained during the biennium (Table 4).



**Figure 10. Mature winter cover with adjacent food sources are effective enhancements to help pheasants get through tough winters and cold wet springs.**



**Table 4. Summary of habitat enhancement and maintenance activities: Denton.**

<b>Project Sites</b>	<b>FY2015</b>		<b>FY2016</b>	
<b><i>Beckman WMA Projects</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>
Food Plot	4	5	4	5
Nesting Cover & Food Plot Renovation	2	65	3	71
Shelterbelt	4	15	4	15
Silver Sage Travel Corridors	9	4 (5 miles double rows)	9	4 (5 miles double rows)
Silver Sage - interseeding perm cover between rows	0	0	9	4
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>99</b>
	<b>FY2015</b>		<b>FY2016</b>	
<b><i>DNRC Wolf Creek Projects</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>
Food Plot	1	2	1	2
Shelterbelt	1	4	1	4
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>
	<b>FY2015</b>		<b>FY2016</b>	
<b><i>PF Wolf Creek Projects</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>
Food Plot	2	2	2	2
Nesting Cover	1	27	1	27
Shelterbelt	1	7	1	7
Silver Sage Travel Corridors	6	4 (3 miles double rows)	6	4 (3 miles double rows)
Silver Sage - interseeding perm cover between rows	0	0	6	5
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>45</b>
	<b>FY2015</b>		<b>FY2016</b>	
<b><i>PF Coffee Creek Projects</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>	<b><i>Total Project Sites</i></b>	<b><i>Total Habitat Acres</i></b>
Brood Cover	1	1	1	1
Food Plot	10	36	10	36
Nesting Cover (DNC)	4	300	4	300
Shelterbelt	4	34	4	34
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>371</b>

	FY2015		FY2016	
<i><b>DNRC Coffee Creek Project</b></i>	<i><b>Total Project Sites</b></i>	<i><b>Total Habitat Acres</b></i>	<i><b>Total Project Sites</b></i>	<i><b>Total Habitat Acres</b></i>
Food Plot	1	7	1	7
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	FY2015		FY2016	
	<b>Total Project Sites</b>	<b>Total Habitat Acres</b>	<b>Total Project Sites</b>	<b>Total Habitat Acres</b>
	<b>51</b>	<b>513</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>528</b>

#### REGION 5 BILLINGS-BASED FARMING (FWP/HF/BLM PARTNERSHIP)

Partnership funding in support of the Billings Habitat Forever farm work is intended for restoring and enhancing pheasant and other upland game bird habitats on public lands open to hunting along the Yellowstone River and its major tributaries in Yellowstone, Treasure, Stillwater, Carbon, Bighorn, and Sweetgrass counties. Additional supporting partners include the Yellowstone Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever, Billings Rod & Gun Club, Montana Chapter of Safari Club, and Conoco Phillips.

During the biennium, efforts continued to focus on three tracts of public land: BLM Pompey's Pillar, FWP Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area, and FWP Voyagers Rest Fishing Access Site. (Table 5).

Habitat enhancements included irrigated food plots, dry land food plots, irrigated nesting cover, dry land nesting cover, irrigated brood plots, wetland development, riparian vegetation restoration, and shelterbelt/winter cover plantings and maintenance (Figure 11).

In FY 2015, the UGBEP contributed \$55,524 to enhance and maintain over 150 project acres. In FY 2016, the UGBEP contributed \$36,213 to enhance and maintain over 250 project acres. These project enhancements provide a combined total of 4,870 acres of public access for upland game bird hunting.

**Table 5. Summary of Habitat Forever enhancement and maintenance activities: Billings.**

	FY2015	FY2016
<b>BLM Pompeys Pillar Projects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 years of site prep culminated in a 900-shrub shelterbelt</li> <li>• 80-acre site prepped and seeded to wheat for future dense nesting cover</li> <li>• Prescribed fire on small grassland.</li> <li>• Site prep, seeding operation, irrigation on 30 acres of food plots</li> <li>• Maintenance on native seedings, removing small weed infested sites, prepare for reseeding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established 57 acres of irrigated barley cover crop</li> <li>• Established 30 acres of food plots (21 acres of corn and soy beans, and 9 acres sunflowers / small grains)</li> <li>• Irrigated approximately 74 acres of existing dense nesting cover</li> <li>• Shelterbelts and 4 acre grass planting on former homestead site for weed control</li> <li>• Spraying for noxious weed control throughout entire site.</li> </ul>

	FY2015	FY2016
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 300 shrub shelterbelt planted and maintained</li> <li>• 16 acres of food plots, planted food plots, irrigation throughout growing season.</li> <li>• Brood strips maintained with bentonite to help increase water retention</li> <li>• 10-acre dense nesting cover established</li> <li>• Mowing maintenance on grassland areas, mowed crowing lanes in early spring.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Established 20 acres of food plots consisting of 12 acres of corn / soybeans, 5 acres of sunflowers, and 3 acres of barley.</li> <li>• 1.5 acres of nesting cover grass mix established and maintained</li> <li>• 175 juniper trees and 50 silver sagebrush planted in shelterbelts and around shop area</li> <li>• Mowed, tilled, and maintained 6 brood strips</li> <li>• Spread bentonite on brood strip to help with water retention</li> <li>• Noxious weed control</li> </ul>
<b>FWP Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area</b>		
	FY2015	FY2016
	NA	Cultivated, planted, and irrigated 3.5 acre food plot of corn and soy beans. Spraying to control noxious weeds, primarily Canada thistle.
<b>FWP Voyagers Rest Fishing Access Site Projects</b>		



**Figure 11. Sorghum provides excellent winter cover and food for pheasants and other wildlife (Yellowstone WMA).**

## BIENNIAL REVENUE

The UGBEP is primarily funded with earmarked license dollars. For each upland game bird license sold, the program receives the following revenue:

- resident upland game bird (includes combination sports) = \$2
- nonresident upland game bird (includes combination sports) = \$23
- 3-day nonresident upland game bird = \$10

Annual license revenues for FY 2015 and FY 2016 were \$650,202 and \$745,282, respectively (Table 6).

## BIENNIAL EXPENDITURES

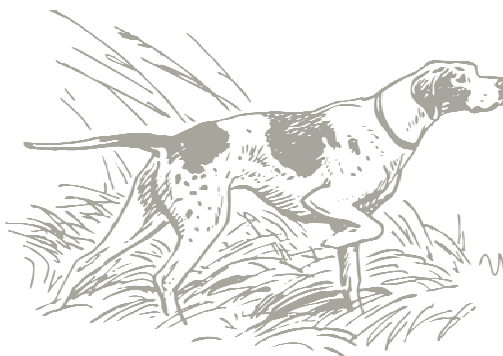
### EXPENDED FUNDS

Table 6 identifies the beginning balances for FY 2015 and FY 2016 and reports the license revenues and expenditures. Total expenditures were \$379,794 in FY 2015 and increased to \$722,918 in FY 2016. In addition, the program expended a total of \$89,094 from a USDA Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant to fund Open Fields projects during the biennium (Table 6).

Administrative expenditures in FY 2015 and FY 2016 were \$153,578 and \$302,197, respectively (Table 6). These expenditures included all costs attributable to the overall operation and implementation of the program, including personnel and operations costs of the UGBEP coordinator and a portion of the 3 UGBEP habitat specialists' positions. The 3 habitat specialists were also funded by Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid dollars (Table 7). All three of the habitat specialists' positions were vacant the first 6 months of FY 2015.

The 12-member Council met 4 times during FY 2015 and FY 2016. Expenditures included daily honorariums, mileage and lodging costs, per-diem allowances, and meeting expenses (Table 6).

The program expended \$60,008 and \$78,699 on pen-reared pheasant releases in FY 2015 and FY 2016, respectively (Table 6).





**Table 6. UGBEP biennial revenue and spending.**

<b>FY 2015</b>						
<b>UGBEP FUNDING (\$)</b>		<b>FY 2015 EXPENDITURES (\$)</b>				<b>BALANCE SUMMARY (\$)</b>
<b>FY 2015 Beginning Balance</b>	<b>License Revenue</b>	<b>Bird Planting</b>	<b>Habitat Enhancement</b>	<b>Admin<sup>1, 2</sup></b>	<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>FY 2015 Year End Balance</b>
3,122,588	650,202	60,008	166,208	153,578	<b>379,794</b>	<b>3,392,996</b>
<sup>1</sup> Administrative expenditures include \$13,077 for the biannual Council meetings.						
<sup>2</sup> Includes overhead.						
<b>FY 2016</b>						
<b>UGBEP FUNDING (\$)</b>		<b>FY 2016 EXPENDITURES (\$)</b>				<b>BALANCE SUMMARY (\$)</b>
<b>FY 2016 Beginning Balance</b>	<b>License Revenue</b>	<b>Bird Planting</b>	<b>Habitat Enhancement</b>	<b>Admin<sup>1, 2</sup></b>	<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>FY 2016 Year End Balance</b>
3,392,996	745,282	78,699	342,022	302,197	<b>722,918</b>	<b>3,415,360</b>
<sup>1</sup> Administrative expenditures include \$11,902 for the biannual Council meetings.						
<sup>2</sup> Includes overhead.						

87-1-246 and 87-1-247, MCA

**Table 7. Non-license funds that contributed to the UGBEP.**

	<b>FY 2015</b>			<b>FY 2016</b>		
<b>Source</b>	<b>Habitat Enhancement</b>	<b>Admin</b>	<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>Habitat Enhancement</b>	<b>Admin</b>	<b>Total Expenditures</b>
Pittman-Robertson	NA	\$102,482	\$102,482	NA	\$153,230	\$153,230
VPA-HIP	\$240	NA	\$240	\$88,854	NA	\$88,854
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>\$240</b>	<b>\$102,482</b>	<b>\$102,722</b>	<b>\$88,854</b>	<b>\$153,252</b>	<b>\$242,083</b>

#### OBLIGATED FUNDS

The FY 2016 ending balance for the UGBEP was \$3,415,360 (Table 6). Of these funds, \$1,713,809 has been obligated to specific contracts and grant commitments, leaving a balance of \$1,701,551 in uncommitted funds. Table 8 provides a breakdown of funding obligations.

In consideration of the unspent, yet obligated funds noted in Table 6, nearly half of the FY 2016 ending balance (\$3,415,360) has been obligated. The pay outs from these obligated funds will continue through FY 2027 to cover 10-year habitat management lease payments; however, the majority of these funds will be expended within the next five years (through FY 2021). These known obligations do not include unknown future habitat cost-shares, habitat management leases, funds contributed to conservation easements, administrative costs, or bird planting expenses.

**Table 8. Program funds currently obligated to contracts or grant commitments.**

<b>Program Type</b>	<b>Amount (\$)</b>
UGBEP: Habitat enhancement contracts	570,460
Habitat Forever: (Charlo, Denton, and Billings partnerships) 5-year agreements	443,827
National Wild Turkey Federation Cooperative Wildlife Biologist (match commitment)	95,269
Open Fields: Payments due FY18	112,536
Volunteer Public Access – Habitat Incentives Program Grant (match commitment)	291,717
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Grant (match commitment)	200,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,713,809</b>

## **UPLAND GAME BIRD HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM**

### **PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND STATUS**

The UGBEP funds habitat enhancements and conservation through partnerships with landowners, organizations, state, and federal government agencies. During the biennium, the UGBEP enrolled 66 projects comprising over 16,000 project acres that enhanced or conserved upland game bird habitats. Project types included establishments of nesting cover, shelter-belts, native rangeland restoration, grazing management, a habitat management lease, retention of CRP-enrolled lands, and food plots. As a result of these projects, over 77,000 acres of land were available for free public upland game bird hunting, which provided an estimated 13,000 hunter-days annually (Table 10). The “Walk-in” category highlighted in Table 10 refers to private lands projects where landowners agree to allow walk in game bird hunting with no further permission needed.

During the biennium, the program obligated \$506,103 for habitat enhancement projects. All UGBEP contracts received outside funding or in-kind contributions from a variety of sources including private landowners, USDA programs, Pheasants Forever chapters, BLM, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, or other FWP habitat program funds. Overall, UGBEP funds made up about 65% of total project costs. The remaining project costs came from cooperators, usually in-kind contributions (21%) and cash contributions from other agencies (14%).

As of October 2016, the UGBEP had 457 active contracts comprising over 486,000 project acres, totaling over 804,000 acres available for public upland game bird hunting (Table 9).

**Table 9. Summary of the number of active UGBEP projects, as reported from past UGBEP reports.**

<b>Biennium Report</b>	<b>#UGBEP Contracts (Active)</b>	<b>Project Acres</b>	<b>Access Acres</b>
FY 2015/FY 2016	457	486,583	804,583
FY 2013/FY 2014	376	373,000	823,000
FY 2011/FY 2012	256	300,000	675,000
FY 2009/FY 2010	301	320,000	770,000
FY 2007/FY 2008	268	330,000	800,000

**Table 10. UGBEP habitat enhancement projects initiated during the biennium.**

Project Type (Public land, Block Management, or Walk In access notation)	Region	County	Project Effective Date	Obligated Costs				Project Acres	Acres Open to Hunting
				UGBEP	Cooperator	Other Partners	Project Total		
Aspen Regeneration (USFS)	3	Gallatin	07/20/15	\$60,000	\$27,540	\$0	\$87,540	150	1,000
Brood Strips (WMA)	7	Treasure	09/29/15	\$4,156	\$0	\$0	\$4,156	2	1,541
CRP Seed Cost Share	4	Toole	04/01/15	\$10,673	\$4,269	\$14,943	\$29,885	534	638
CRP Seed Cost Share (BMA)	7	Garfield	07/11/14	\$3,860	\$1,544	\$5,502	\$10,906	193	1,268
Grazing Management	6	Hill	05/06/15	\$39,518	\$39,518	\$0	\$79,036	3,370	1,616
Habitat Management Lease/Fence (DNRC)	4	Pondera	12/10/15	\$37,141	\$0	\$0	\$37,141	72	2,220
Native Rangeland Seeding (USFWS)	6	Phillips	10/01/14	\$8,760	\$5,916	\$0	\$14,676	146	146
Nesting Cover (WMA)	3	Broadwater	04/06/16	\$1,744	\$1,200	\$0	\$2,944	27	5,129
Nesting Cover (WMA)	4	Teton	04/21/16	\$2,442	\$2,900	\$0	\$5,342	25	11,466
Nesting Cover (WMA)	4	Toole	03/24/16	\$11,919	\$17,446	\$0	\$29,365	33	5,800
Nesting Cover (WMA)	6	Hill	03/24/16	\$2,000	\$2,640	\$0	\$4,640	95	2,250
Nesting Cover (BLM)	7	Custer	03/17/16	\$16,297	\$0	\$0	\$16,297	132	1,700
Nesting Cover (WMA)	7	Richland	03/05/15	\$3,019	\$0	\$0	\$3,019	42	1,585

Table 10 – Continued. UGBEP habitat enhancement projects initiated during the biennium.

Project Type (Public land or Block Management notation)	Region	County	Project Effective Date	Obligated Costs				Project Acres	Acres Open to Hunting
				UGBEP	Cooperator	Other Partners	Project Total		
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Cascade	09/01/15	\$3,600	\$0	\$3,600	\$7,200	160	320
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Cascade	09/01/15	\$1,416	\$0	\$1,416	\$2,838	81	236
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Cascade	09/01/15	\$3,768	\$0	\$3,768	\$7,537	126	148
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Chouteau	09/01/15	\$4,000	\$0	\$4,000	\$8,000	160	180
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Chouteau	09/01/15	\$2,000	\$0	\$2,000	\$4,000	160	235
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Chouteau	09/01/15	\$2,800	\$0	\$2,800	\$5,600	160	335
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Chouteau	09/01/15	\$803	\$0	\$803	\$1,606	80	272
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Pondera	09/01/15	\$3,200	\$0	\$3,200	\$6,400	160	205
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Teton	09/01/15	\$3,200	\$0	\$3,200	\$6,400	160	323
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Teton	09/01/15	\$3,200	\$0	\$3,200	\$6,400	160	244
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Teton	09/01/15	\$2,800	\$0	\$2,800	\$5,600	160	320
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Toole	09/01/15	\$2,800	\$0	\$2,800	\$5,600	160	316
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Toole	09/01/15	\$2,739	\$0	\$2,739	\$5,477	156	156



Table 10 – Continued. UGBEP habitat enhancement projects initiated during the biennium.

MONTANA UPLAND GAME BIRD ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

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Project Type (Public land or Block Management notation)	Region	County	Project Effective Date	Obligated Costs				Project Acres	Acres Open to Hunting
				UGBEP	Cooperator	Other Partners	Project Total		
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Toole	09/01/15	\$2,800	\$0	\$2,800	\$5,600	160	243
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Toole	09/01/15	\$2,487	\$0	\$2,487	\$4,974	160	623
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Toole	09/01/15	\$2,268	\$0	\$2,268	\$4,535	160	307
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	4	Toole	09/01/15	\$800	\$0	\$800	\$1,600	160	620
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Daniels	09/01/15	\$1,782	\$0	\$1,782	\$3,563	112	320
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Daniels	09/01/15	\$2,000	\$0	\$2,000	\$4,000	160	286
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Daniels	09/01/15	\$2,673	\$0	\$2,673	\$5,346	160	296
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Daniels	09/01/15	\$1,101	\$0	\$1,101	\$2,202	37	157
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Daniels	09/01/15	\$2,372	\$0	\$2,372	\$4,743	158	213
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Daniels	09/01/15	\$2,601	\$0	\$2,601	\$5,201	149	299
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Hill	09/01/15	\$705	\$0	\$705	\$1,410	142	301
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	McCone	09/01/15	\$2,800	\$0	\$2,800	\$5,600	160	432
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	McCone	09/01/15	\$2,000	\$0	\$2,000	\$4,000	151	320

**Table 10 – Continued. UGBEP habitat enhancement projects initiated during the biennium.**

Project Type (Public land or Block Management notation)	Region	County	Project Effective Date	Obligated Costs				Project Acres	Acres Open to Hunting
				UGBEP	Cooperator	Other Partners	Project Total		
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	McCone	09/01/15	\$3,200	\$0	\$3,200	\$6,400	160	320
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	McCone	09/01/15	\$2,400	\$0	\$2,400	\$4,800	160	597
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	McCone	09/01/15	\$2,400	\$0	\$2,400	\$4,800	160	295
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	McCone	09/01/15	\$2,400	\$0	\$2,400	\$4,800	160	640
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Richland	09/01/15	\$2,070	\$0	\$2,070	\$4,140	138	160
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Roosevelt	09/01/15	\$2,330	\$0	\$2,330	\$4,659	155	160
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	6	Valley	09/01/15	\$1,980	\$0	\$1,980	\$3,960	158	160
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	7	Dawson	09/01/15	\$1,012	\$0	\$1,012	\$2,023	58	320
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	7	Dawson	09/01/15	\$2,000	\$0	\$2,000	\$4,000	160	469
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	7	Dawson	09/01/15	\$2,400	\$0	\$2,400	\$4,800	160	440
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	7	Garfield	09/01/15	\$2,800	\$0	\$2,800	\$5,600	160	382
Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters (Walk-in)	7	Richland	09/01/15	\$1,146	\$0	\$1,146	\$2,292	115	320
Sagebrush Lease (30-year)	7	Garfield	05/25/16	\$0	\$0	\$84,198	\$84,198	5,613	5,613

Table 10 – Continued. UGBEP habitat enhancement projects initiated during the biennium.

Project Type (Public land or Block Management notation)	Region	County	Project Effective Date	Obligated Costs				Project Acres	Acres Open to Hunting
				UGBEP	Cooperator	Other Partners	Project Total		
Shelterbelts	6	Sheridan	09/25/15	\$11,394	\$4,741	\$0	\$16,135	5	300
Shelterbelts (BMA)	7	Prairie	09/02/15	\$9,545	\$5,218	\$0	\$14,763	5	1,280
Shelterbelts (WMA)	7	Richland	04/01/16	\$3,112	\$0	\$0	\$3,112	3	1,541
Shelterbelts (WMA)	7	Richland	04/01/16	\$10,097	\$0	\$0	\$10,097	2	1,585
Winter Food or Cover Plots (WMA)	4	Toole	09/25/15	\$20,578	\$23,759	\$0	\$44,337	35	5,800
Winter Food or Cover Plots (BMA)	6	Daniels	08/04/15	\$1,176	\$392	\$0	\$1,568	8	3,500
Winter Food or Cover Plots	6	Daniels	08/01/15	\$1,350	\$450	\$0	\$1,800	3	320
Winter Food or Cover Plots (WMA)	6	Hill	03/24/16	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	77	* <del>2,250</del>
Winter Food or Cover Plots	6	Sheridan	11/01/15	\$1,289	\$430	\$0	\$1,719	13	310
Winter Food or Cover Plots (BMA)	7	Dawson	04/02/16	\$31,500	\$10,500	\$0	\$42,000	40	1,431
Winter Food or Cover Plots (BMA)	7	Dawson	05/16/16	\$6,000	\$0	\$0	\$6,000	10	4,366
Winter Food or Cover Plots (WMA)	7	Richland	03/05/15	\$1,207	\$0	\$0	\$1,207	4	* <del>1,585</del>

\* Access acres are accounted for in another project that is part of the same UGBEP contract. These figures are not included in the total.

Table 10 – Continued. UGBEP habitat enhancement projects initiated during the biennium.

Project Type (Public land or Block Management notation)	Region	County	Project Effective Date	Obligated Costs				Project Acres	Acres Open to Hunting
				UGBEP	Cooperator	Other Partners	Project Total		
Winter Food or Cover Plots (BMA)	7	Fallon	05/16/16	\$24,120	\$11,120	\$0	\$35,240	26	1,960
Winter Food or Cover Plots (WMA)	7	Treasure	04/01/15	\$5,500	\$0	\$0	\$5,500	80	1,169
<b><i>SUMMARY: 66 Projects</i></b>				<b><i>\$506,103</i></b>	<b><i>\$159,583</i></b>	<b><i>\$104,643</i></b>	<b><i>\$770,329</i></b>	<b><i>16,241</i></b>	<b><i>77,505</i></b>





## UPLAND GAME BIRD RELEASE PROGRAM

### PHEASANT RELEASES

The purpose of pen-reared pheasant releases is to help landowners and other interested individuals establish pheasant populations in suitable habitats that have combinations of permanent winter cover, idle cover (e.g., CRP), and cultivated grain. Each release comprises of up to 40% cocks (12.9.602(1)(b), ARM).

Cooperators are eligible to participate in the pen-reared pheasant releasing program for up to 5 consecutive years (12.9.602(1)(r), ARM). An additional 5-year release period may be possible if habitat improvements are established that address factors limiting pheasant numbers.

For FY 2015, the program released 6,654 pen-reared pheasants and expended \$60,008. During FY 2016, the program expended \$78,699 for the release of 8,442 pen-reared pheasants (Table 11). Pen-reared pheasants were released into areas with suitable habitats between August 1 and September 15 (Figure 12).

**Table 11. Summary of pheasant release contracts awarded.**

Region	FY 2015			FY 2016		
	# Contracts	# Pheasants	# Access (ac)	# Contracts	# Pheasants	# Access (ac)
3	0	0	0	1	125	370
4	2	500	4,421	0	0	0
6	44	5,579	50,850	39	5,367	44,024
7	3	575	14,300	16	2,950	43,920
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>6,654</b>	<b>69,571</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>8,442</b>	<b>88,314</b>



Photo credit: Diane Boyd, FWP

**Figure 12. Pheasants survey their new habitat before taking flight (Region 4).**

In FY 2018, 32 of the 89 (36%) cooperators who have released pheasants since FY 2014 will no longer be eligible to receive pheasants through the program unless additional habitat enhancements are conducted. Informational postcards were sent in 2013 to alert cooperators of this 2012 rule change. Letters accompanying cooperators' 2016 contracts also reminded them of the program rule and provided them with their end date. Correspondence also emphasized that additional habitat enhancements would need to be planned and up to 75% of the project cost may be cost-shared through the program.

The pheasant release program is announced twice-annually through news releases but is largely promoted by local pheasant raisers. Cooperator interest tends to wane unless pheasant raisers assist with the application submission process. The program enrolled 4 new cooperators in FY 2015 and 7 new cooperators in FY 2016.

#### WILD TURKEY TRANSPLANTS

During FY 2015, the department collaborated with the National Wild Turkey Federation and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission to trap 95 Merriam's wild turkeys in Nebraska and release them in north central Montana along the Teton River (Phase I). UGBEP contributed \$1,000 towards the effort. Phase II occurred during FY 2016, when an additional 125 Merriam's wild turkeys were trapped in Nebraska and released along the Missouri River corridor (Figure 13). UGBEP contributed \$1,283 towards Phase II. Additional partners included Safari Club International and local sportsmen's groups.



Photo courtesy of Cory Loecker, FWP

**Figure 13. A Merriam's wild turkey flies to its new home in Montana.**

## SUPPLEMENTAL FEEDING

Supplemental feeding did not occur in Region 6 during the biennium. The option of supplemental feeding is restricted to a 3-county area in northeast Montana (12.9.615(1), ARM). Monitoring of winter conditions on established routes was conducted from January through March. Winter conditions remained relatively mild to average, indicating feeding criteria were not met.

## PROGRAM EVALUATION AND ONGOING ADAPTATION

The UGBEP receives evaluation or feedback in a number of ways, which helps the program adapt to changing circumstances, improving performance. These include: (1) project monitoring, (2) ongoing assessment of needs, (3) input from the Council, and (4) hunter and cooperator feedback.

## MONITORING CONTRACTS

During the biennium, the habitat specialists monitored a total of 54 active UGBEP habitat project sites to evaluate the status and productivity. These include shelterbelts, food and cover plots, dense nesting cover, and grazing management projects. Open Fields enrollments were also monitored annually during the biennium to ensure the habitat was intact and that signs were in place. In FY 2015, all 32 Sagebrush Leases were monitored through aerial surveys to determine if any land conversion occurred. In addition, nearly 110 pheasant release sites were evaluated initially during February and again late summer when releases occurred to ensure habitat cover remained unchanged. For all visited project sites, the staff posted new program signs and updated landowner contact information as needed.

Monitoring also occurs throughout the year for projects under development as staff check in with cooperators to note progress and verify project completeness.

## UGBEP CITIZENS' ADVISORY COUNCIL

The council and department staff met four times in this past biennium to review work planning and progress, receive public input, and to make program recommendations. Since 2009, the Council's dedication to the program combined with their input has served to improve program performance. The department appreciates the Council's dedication and work with the program.

The following items highlight the council's recommendations over the past biennium:

- Replace the reference in the field manual regarding a minimum number of hunter days with negotiated reasonable public access as part of conservation lease agreements.
- Maintaining status quo for UGBEP statutes.

- Department to print additional copies of the hunting access guide to allow the regions and habitat specialists to place booklets strategically at locations as they see fit.
- Raise the Open Fields enrollment cap option up to 320 acres, to include new and existing enrollments, if the current VPA-HIP grant allows for such an increase.
- FWP develop an operational definition for the term “project” with regard to the \$100,000 expenditure cap.

## UGBEP HUNTER SURVEY

A web-based UGBEP survey is available online year-round with the link published in the UGBEP Projects Access Guide and program web page. During the biennium, 152 respondents provided input on the UGBEP. Of the 152 respondents (hunters), 99 were non-residents and 53 were Montana residents (Table 12). One hundred thirteen of the 152 respondents provided their overall level of satisfaction with the UGBEP (Table 13).

Hunters provided comments and recommendations on program implementation, such as the condition of the habitat cover and management, and placement of signs. Generally, hunters’ comments support the UGBEP with encouragement to expand the program to other areas of the state.

**Table 12. Summary of respondents and use of UGBEP projects.**

	# Respondents
Resident	53
Nonresident	99
<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>

**Table 13. Level of satisfaction from hunters that visited UGBEP projects.**

Respondents	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	No Response
Resident	14	38	8	11	4	24
Nonresident	15	16	6	3	4	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>33</b>

## OPEN FIELDS HUNTER SURVEY

The program also sought input from hunters who specifically hunted on Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters projects. During the biennium, 17 resident and 6 non-resident hunters (total = 23) participated in the survey reporting that they hunted on Open Fields enrollments. Hunters were asked to provide input on their harvest and their level of satisfaction with their hunting experience, habitat quality, access guide, and signage. Their general level of satisfaction is reported in Table 14.

**Table 14. Level of satisfaction from hunters that visited UGBEP projects during the biennium.**

Respondents	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	No Response
Resident	10	2	3	0	2
Nonresident	3	2	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>

#### COOPERATOR FEEDBACK

The program maintains contact with its active cooperators via communication by department staff throughout the year. Periodically, the program will also send letters or postcards to cooperators to “touch base” and remind them of their enrollment in the program, offer information on new cost-share opportunities, ask for feedback on their enrollment, and to thank them for their participation. The program is scheduled to send letters to cooperators in January 2017.

#### PROGRAM REFINEMENT AND ADAPTATION

In response to feedback described above as well as ongoing internal review, the UGBEP continues to adapt to changes in farming practices, landowner interests, Farm Bill, and new technologies and science.

The following are examples of recent program innovations, refinements, and adaptations.

- Management leases: Partly in response to the popularity of Open Fields projects (as heard from hunters, FWP staff, and the Council) and in recognition that there are many highly productive upland game bird habitats in addition to CRP fields, the program has enrolled several small habitat management leases to conserve high value habitats and to increase game bird hunting opportunities. Habitats might include mature shelterbelts, productive riparian areas, expired UGBEP projects, and other high value cover types.
- A Habitat Forever Specialist position was created for Lake County to expand the conservation footprint in the Ninepipe WMA / USFWS WPA areas.
- During the biennium, program staff worked with FWP Technology Services on improvements to the program database. An updated version is scheduled for release in 2017; it will increase administrative efficiency and improve data storage. In the near future, the database will be enhanced with additional functionalities.
- For hunting purposes, the program is also keeping pace with current technology. Beginning in FY 2015, the annual Projects Access Guide became available online that allows users to download program maps into their “smart” mobile device. Hunters can now identify their position in the field relative to important features on the downloaded map, such as roads, without the need of an internet connection or cell coverage.



## PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS MONTANA

Throughout its history, the UGBEP has worked with a variety of partners, including many landowners, state, federal, and county government agencies and nongovernment conservation partners. Table 15 summarizes the growing list of agency and organization partners the program has teamed up with to enhance upland game bird populations.

**Table 15. Summary of agencies and conservation groups who partnered on UGBEP projects.**

Region 1	Region 2
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Five Valleys Chapter of Pheasants Forever Habitat Forever Mission Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever US Fish Wildlife Service	Blackfoot Community Conservation Area National Wild Turkey Federation US Forest Service
Region 3	Region 4
Beaverhead Chapter of Pheasants Forever Bureau of Land Management, Butte Field Office Gallatin Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever Headwaters Chapter of Pheasants Forever Lazy Game Birds NRCS Field Office, Beaverhead County US Fish Wildlife Service – Arctic Grayling Program	Bureau of Land Management, Havre Field Office Central Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever DNRC State Lands, Conrad Unit Ducks Unlimited Farm Service Agency, Cascade County Farm Service Agency, Chouteau County Farm Service Agency, Glacier County Farm Service Agency, Pondera County Farm Service Agency, Teton County Farm Service Agency, Toole County Habitat Forever, Denton Headwaters Chapter of Pheasants Forever Montana Salinity Control Association Nebraska Game and Parks Commission NRCS Field Office, Cascade County NRCS Field Office, Chouteau County NRCS Field Office, Glacier County NRCS Field Office, Pondera County NRCS Field Office, Teton County NRCS Field Office, Toole County Rimrock Valley Preserve, LLC Pheasants Forever – Farm Bill Biologists Pondera County Conservation District Upper Missouri Chapter of Pheasants Forever USFWS Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge USFWS Benton Lake Wetland Management District USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife

Region 5	Region 6
Billings Rod & Gun Club Bureau of Land Management, Billings Field Office Conoco Phillips-Phillips 66 Habitat Forever, Billings Montana Chapter of Safari Club Yellowstone Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever	Daniels County Conservation District DNRC State Lands, Glasgow Unit Ducks Unlimited Farm Service Agency, Blaine County Farm Service Agency, Daniels County Farm Service Agency, Hill County Farm Service Agency, McCone County Farm Service Agency, Phillips County Farm Service Agency, Richland County Farm Service Agency, Roosevelt County Farm Service Agency, Sheridan County Farm Service Agency, Valley County National Wild Turkey Federation Northeast Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever NRCS Field Office, Blaine County NRCS Field Office, Daniels County NRCS Field Office, Daniels County NRCS Field Office, Hill County NRCS Field Office, Phillips County NRCS Field Office, Richland County NRCS Field Office, Roosevelt County NRCS Field Office, Sheridan County NRCS Field Office, Valley County Pheasants Forever Phillips County Conservation District Roosevelt County Conservation District Sheridan County Conservation District Sorenson Pheasant Farm The Nature Conservancy USFWS Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge USFWS Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program
Region 7	
American Bird Conservancy Bureau of Land Management, Miles City Office Farm Service Agency, Dawson County Farm Service Agency, McCone County NRCS Field Office, Baker County NRCS Field Office, Carter County NRCS Field Office, Custer County NRCS Field Office, McCone County NRCS Field Office, Richland County	

## **FY 2017 PROGRAM EMPHASIS**

In addition to continued implementation of all aspects of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program described above, the following program objectives scheduled during FY 2017 are described below.

### **COOPERATIVE FARMING CONTRACTS**

The 2 personal service contracts with Habitat Forever in Denton (Region 4) and Billings (Region 5) expire December 31, 2017. The contracts are set up to allow for annual renewals if there is unspent funding. Based on the average, annual expenditures, the Denton farming work may be funded up through FY 2021. The Habitat Farming contract in Billings may have enough unexpended funding to allow renewals through FY 2019. The program coordinator will prepare contract renewals as allowed by each contract.

### **WESTERN FOREST MANAGEMENT CONTRACT**

The personal services contract for the National Wild Turkey Federation cooperative biologist's position expires December 31, 2017, but may be renewed annually if unspent dollars remain in the account. Based on the current average annual expenditure, the department estimates the funding may go through a portion of FY 2019. The program coordinator will prepare contract renewals as allowed by contract.

### **OPEN FIELDS FOR GAME BIRD HUNTERS**

Towards the end of FY 2014, FWP was awarded another Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentives Program grant to expand enrollment of Open Fields projects. The goals of Open Fields projects are to (1) help retain lands enrolled in CRP, (2) enroll productive habitats currently enrolled in USDA conservation programs, and (3) provide incentives to landowners for habitat conservation and public access. The 3-year grant award amounted to \$491,000 with an additional \$450,000 match from the program. To date, the program has enrolled 67 landowners involving over 9,600 CRP acres. The VPA HIP grant and UGBEP funds have collectively obligated a total of \$316,569.

Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters focuses on enrolling CRP acres to conserve wildlife habitat and provide game bird hunting opportunities. CRP has been expiring at an alarming rate in Montana. In 2016 alone, 71,670 acres expired. Montana is scheduled to lose an additional 408,000 acres in 2017 and another 111,376 acres in 2018. The Farm Service Agency reports that 1.4 million CRP acres in Montana will expire from 2016 through 2030. Enrollment in CRP has also been challenging for the Montana producer. During the 49th general sign-up (2015-2016), Montanans offered 188,276 acres but only 17,829 acres were accepted (~9.5%). This decline in CRP (re)enrollment has impacted Open Fields enrollment opportunities. FWP was granted a 1-year extension from September 30, 2017 to September 30, 2018, to provide opportunity to enroll additional lands.

The following objectives are specified in the grant:

- Enroll 150 landowners new to FWP access or habitat programs
  - Enroll 24,000 to 48,000 CRP acres
  - Expend \$941,000 via a 50/50 mix of UGBEP and Grant funding
- 



**Montana's hunting heritage: Sharing the joy and success of a grouse hunt in North-central Montana.**  
Photo credit: Michael Kowalski